

Q: What if commitment levels are not equal?

On my tombstone, it will say “Here lies a man who used all his words”.

A: I’m adding this question, even though it was one I briefly touched on during the webinar, because it’s really important. Short answer:

There is a Dibble Institute webinar where Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades talk about asymmetrical commitment. It’s good.

<https://dibbleinstitute.org/event/webinar-lopsided-love-asymmetrical-commitment-in-romantic-relationships/>

Much of the research on commitment is based on measurement of commitment in individuals. Most relationship research is, in fact, on individuals. For this question, much better are studies where both partners take part. It so happens, and Galena Rhoades and I (and numerous others in the field) have done a number of such studies, and that allows us to directly compare commitment levels between two partners.

Asymmetrical commitment is difficult and common. Many couples have partners who, chronically so, have substantially different levels of commitment to the relationship. Of course, almost no relationship will have partners who are at identical levels day-in-and-day-out. The former is big real problem and the latter is normal.

We estimate that as many as 1/3 of unmarried couples are seriously, asymmetrically committed. That the difference is real and consequential. Among marrieds, the percent may be less, especially earlier in marriages, because there has been such a clear closure in a declaration of a mutual commitment to the future. And still, many marriages start out pretty lopsided and stay that way.

There are many predictable differences in the high and low-committed partners in asymmetrically committed relationships—see the “Unequally into us paper” below. In an asymmetrically committed relationship, I would expect to see an unfair level of sacrificing between partners. The more committed partner will sacrifice more and the less, less. That more and less pattern will exist across various indicators of dedication. That will feel bad, perhaps, to both.

Sometimes the lopsidedness is more perceived than real—perhaps because two people have different love languages for giving. That happens, and it’s unfortunate, because one can be giving a lot to the other in a way the other does not appreciate or see. One explanation for this is that we all come from different places. Someone who grew up with models of healthy giving between adults in romantic relationships may naturally do a lot of it (and, with good motives, too—not to be a martyr but just out of their nature and experience). Another person who has not had those experiences or had challenging experiences related to secure attachment may struggle to freely give or even have fears about vulnerability related to past experiences. People vary in their natural ability to give to another when committed (or in general). That makes the relationship tricky for two people paired together. One naturally gives more and the other naturally less, but both might be quite committed.

It’s always worthwhile for anyone in a committed relationship to stop and think from time to time about the things their partner does, that they don’t have to, that they likely do because they are committed to you. And to try to make sure things get interpreted correctly. It is true that some people give to another to merely put that other in their debt. That’s not giving. But it can be very hard to know which is what. But in a committed relationship, both partners

would do well to take moments to try to appreciate what the other gives. And, further, to watch out for score keeping. Even the best relationships will be ravaged once one or both partners start keep score because none of us will score things fairly. We see everything we do and give and allow ourselves the most generous motivation for why and we cannot possibly see all the other may be doing for us out of love and commitment.

I also want to digress a little on the importance of small sacrifices. The problem with BIG is that big requires big moments that a person cannot contrive. And if one does contrive a big moment, it will no longer have much real information about commitment in it because of the size of the public reward (the subsidy I spoke about). In contrast, small is doable and under our control. Every day doable. We can choose to try to do small things for those we love. Not all gifts will be recognized, but in a healthy relationship, the value of sacrifice is they up the chances that each partner can see in the behavior of the other reinforcing their bond. I'm talking about little things that are more salient than all the baked in, daily routine ways committed partners do things for the relationship. That stuff is important but is too often not seen because it becomes expected.

When a relationship is not symmetrically committed, the dynamics change. Things will be unfair because the more committed partner will be prone to give in ways that are simply not balanced. That breeds, naturally so, resentment and pain. The challenge here is what one can or will do about it. Give less? Confront their partner? Leave? Try to just accept it? I cannot say for any person what they should do or what is likely to "work."

However, it is easier to note what should be obvious in less established relationships, such as when two people have not known each other that long, are dating, or are otherwise in a stage with a lot less constraint. In developing relationships not pinned (stapled) in any substantial way, individuals should interpret lopsided love for what it is—a big red flag—and consider moving on. We have one set of analyses (in the *Before "I Do"* report available online), we point out that if a person perceived themselves to be more committed to their partner before marriage, even years later in marriage, they were likely to be less happily married.

In other contexts, the decisions are much more challenging. Sometimes counseling might help. The paper below entitled "Unequally into us" has practical advice for counselors in the discussion and that may be of interest to some of you in your work or life.

Okay, more resources on asymmetrical commitment! Here you go:

An accessible summary of some of what we have found can be seen at one of these blog sites:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sliding-vs-deciding/201611/what-happens-when-partners-arent-equally-committed>

I think this version is, maybe, slightly longer:

<https://ifstudies.org/blog/weak-and-strong-links-asymmetrical-commitment-in-unmarried-relationships>

Some key citations (you can easily access the abstracts at any rate):

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J. (2006). Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 553-560. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.20.4.553

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., Kelmer, G., Scott, S. B., Markman, H. J., & Fincham, F. D. (2019). Unequally into “Us”: Characteristics of individuals in asymmetrically committed relationships. *Family Process*, 58, 214-231.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/famp.12397>

* This one has a publicly accessible version:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30294892/>

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., Scott, S. B., Kelmer, G., Markman, H. J., & Fincham, F. D. (2017). Asymmetrically committed relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 34, 1241-1259. DOI: 10.1177/0265407516672013

* This one is the best overall for this purpose of really getting the concepts and literature. I cannot directly you to a non-paywalled version of this paper, I can provide a version of the final submitted paper which is not the official publication at the journal publisher, but it will get you the content:

<https://app.box.com/s/irw6nzw8lc47l6iv4lk8l77wz0j608gk>

I will say more that is relevant to this topic in answering the next question.

Q: What if very visible signals of commitment via sacrifice are present but request for verbal proclamation of commitment create conflict?

A: There is much I could not know about the context and dynamic here but a few ideas come to mind. Visible signs of commitment as reflected in healthy sacrifice are truly a very good sign in a relationship and partner. Many commitment theorists have recognized this (whatever word they use for what it is) as crucial in knowing there is commitment. It's a strong signal. By this question, both partners can give and in ways that each can see, and that is evidence of commitment, to be sure.

There might be many ways and reasons why one partner wants more of a public proclamation about commitment, but the other does not. If it's safe to really talk about it, an important conversation would explore why the reticence in the one when the other wants be more strongly signaling their commitment to others. Since it sounds like conflict breaks out when this topic comes up, it is not one where both partners feel emotionally safe when talking about it. One might go at that directly and seek a time where both are at their best and will try to explore what that means and what they might do about it. That's admittedly hard.

I can see at least two scenarios in play for this same pattern. First, sometimes one has had life experiences that lead them to hold back on public declaration of commitment. Perhaps they are resisting engagement or marriage or even just announcing (proclaiming) that they, as a couple, are a thing. They don't want to be official or public about it, but not because they are not committed but because of life experiences. Here's what I mean.

One partner may be more “shy” or reticent about public commitment because of experiences in their past—as a child or adult. That's understandable but also something to work through as a couple over time. A little more complicated, I think some people truly believe that making things clearer raises the risk of ruining the relationship. Ambiguity can feel safe (even if it's not). “If I really admit to myself out loud and to the world how must this means to me, it's going to hurt even more if it ends.” For some people, I think this is very real. That could reinforce some for patience and understanding on the part of the more “ready-to-proclaim things partner, even while wanting that next step is perfectly reasonable.

The other scenario is more challenging in a way because it's more about asymmetry. Sometimes one partner does not really want the relationship to be more publicly committed because they really are not on the same page in terms of where the relationship is headed. Or not on that same page, yet. Big difference, there. But asymmetry can surely be about clarity in oneself about wanting a clearer commitment and a future. The two people could be on different pages about this, and if it's not "not yet" but "not really" it's difficult.

Before saying a little more, I want to acknowledge that not everyone is looking for "the one." These points are mostly relevant where one or both partners are looking for that lasting relationship of deeper commitment, but one may be at a different place on that path or about "this" relationship. In some relationships where one partner is ready to move to the next step and the other not, the partner reticent to proclaim things might be that way because they are simply not sure this is where they want to be. And if so, they are not ready to proclaim to the world greater commitment when that could foreclose other opportunities.

Public displays of commitment have vast signal power provided they are not done for show. Note an important contrast here, though: I don't think there is much information in public displays of affection. Those are a dime a dozen (unless you are somehow paying to watch). Public proclamation of commitment is a type of costly sacrifice with a lot of meaning.

I am sure there are other possibilities, here. Where both partners are clearly strongly committed and willing to give in meaningful ways, I might bet more on the notion above than the second. There is some history and experience that makes a step harder for one than the other. The two people will have to figure that out.

Q: Do these dynamics and theories about commitment apply in all relationships?

A: No one asked this, but many were wondering. I know because I've been doing this a long time. Again, I'm nearly 45 years old now, and I have seen a lot.

I believe commitment theory is like gravity. The stuff just works the way the theories imply. There are exceptions, but not many. But note what I mean by it "just works" I mean the constructs hang together, and if a social scientist makes a prediction based on commitment theory, it's pretty likely to work in a test of it. The interplay between these concepts shows up studies by psychologists, sociologists, and economists time and time again. It is a robust system for thinking about the likely continuance and characteristics of a relationship.

I also believe that the constructs work much the same way for a wide and diverse range of types of relationships. That does not mean that relationships are the same and it surely does not mean that everyone wants the same thing. As a simple example, most people would like to have lasting love with one partner but not everyone. And not everyone wants marriage, for that matter. Yes, most people do seem to want those things but not all. People and relationships vary a great deal in the aspirations, expectations, and contexts.

Still, I would expect that the constructs will work, but at differing levels based on the nature of the relationships being considered. For example, a lower level of dedication to "this" partner does not mean commitment theory does not work, that's exactly what one should expect based on what that person wants or does not want at this point in their life. Constraints will still matter and, depending on circumstances, may accumulate and reinforce stability even if dedication is not high.

I do think the constructs work, perhaps universally. But people and relationships are all different. In fact, a researcher may find that patterns in dimensions of commitment (think high and low on various constructs) may be particularly valuable for understanding differences in relationships based on what people want in life.